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ON THE MEANING OF THE WORD "ASÎTU."

BY REV. CHARLES BOUTFLOWER,

Terling, Witham, Essex, England.

Much difference of opinion has prevailed among Assyriologists as to the meaning of the interesting word *asîtu*, *isîtu*, plur. *asaiâte* and *asitâte*, variously rendered "column," "gate-post," "wall," "pyramid," "artificial mound." Of these different renderings "column" is perhaps the most popular, and yet, as is well pointed out by Professor Morris Jastrow in *HEBRAICA*, July, 1888, the sense of "column" scarcely tallies with what we gather from the inscriptions respecting an Assyrian *asîtu*.

The word *asîtu* as met with in the inscriptions occurs chiefly in connection with the horrible atrocities committed by some of the Assyrian kings on their captives. But in one instance the word is used simply as an architectural term to express some part of the fortifications of a city. The passage to which I allude occurs in the famous inscription of Tiglathpileser I., col. vi, 27, *Dûrašu rabâ u asaiâtešu ša agurri ana napâli aḫ-bašumma*. Here Sayce renders the word "gate-posts," Winckler "pillars;" but I shall endeavor to show that the right rendering is "towers." The city possessed one main line of fortifications, *dûru*, in which, according to the usual plan of defence, were several *asaiâte* or "towers." The passage should, therefore, be rendered: "Its great wall and *towers* of baked brick I ordered to be razed." In the Hebrew Bible we meet with the word once, Jer. 50:15, אֲשִׁירֵיהָ (*Kere*), and it is evident from the context that it is used in exactly the same sense as in the above extract from Tiglathpileser. "Shout against her," *i. e.*, against Babylon, "she hath given her hand, her *towers* are fallen, her walls are thrown down." Here we seem to be gazing at some scene on the Assyrian bas-reliefs, where persons are seen standing on the walls and towers of besieged cities with one or both hands held up in front of the face in token of submission.

In the next place it will be found that the sense "tower" agrees well with the description of an *asîtu* as given by

Assurnatsirpal in one of those recitals of horrors in which some of the Assyrian monarchs seem to have gloried. The passage to which I refer is found in the *Standard Inscription*, col. i, 89. It describes the atrocities perpetrated on the subjects of a certain Aziel, ruler of a small kingdom on the middle Euphrates. Asîtu ina puṭ abulliṣu arṣip, (amêlu) rabûti ammar ibbal-ḳitûni akuṣu, maṣkiṣunu asîtu uḥallip, annûte ina libbi isite umagig, annûte ina eli isite ina (iṣu) zîḳipê uzaḳip, annûte battubatte ṣa asîte ina zîḳipi urakkas, "I built an asîtu at the entrance to his city gate: the chief men, as many as had rebelled against me, I flayed, (and) covered the asîtu with their skins. Some I walled up within the asîtu, others I impaled on stakes upon the asîtu, others (again) I fixed on stakes around the asîtu." From this very full description, as well as from a parallel passage on the *Monolith* of Shalmaneser, col. ii, 53, it appears that an asîtu was something built up; broad enough for the skins of vanquished foes to be stretched upon it; hollow, so that persons could be immured within it; large enough and strong enough for impaled corpses to be set up on the top of it; and, further, that in the present instance it stood alone, surrounded with a ghastly ring of victims. All these indications point to "tower" as the right meaning of the word.

But here the question arises, Did the Assyrians actually build towers in order to adorn them with moldering remains of their foes? It appears that they did. In many cases, no doubt, they were content to garnish and deck out the fortifications of captured cities and fortresses with the heads of their brave defenders, but in some instances the spirit of revenge went farther, and a tower or towers were built, confronting the captured stronghold to be adorned with the heads, and sometimes also with the bodies and skins, of the vanquished. In proof of this assertion I would call attention to plates F, 4 and 5, in Pinches' valuable work, *The Bronze Ornaments of the Gates of Balawat*. On these plates we see depicted in two horizontal bands the campaign of Shalmaneser II., in 855 B. C., against Ubura, a city of the chieftain Ilu-Khita. This city, which stands on very rugged ground, is represented in the upper band as being besieged by the Assyrians, while archers stationed on the towers endeavor to repel the foe. In the lower band, and just underneath, we are

shown what appears to be a second representation of the same city, though the details of the fortifications are not in all respects the same. The city has now been captured, and its walls are seen to be deserted, but just outside the town and on the spectator's left hand a new feature is introduced into the scene, to wit, a tower standing by itself, and architecturally an exact copy of some of the towers in the city wall. This tower is adorned down one side with a double row of heads. On the same side and close by stands a post, *zakipu*, adorned with a single row of heads. In this tower, then, we have a veritable *asîtu*, and the manner of its adornment illustrates an oft-recurring expression on the *Mono-lith* of Shalmaneser II., *asîtu ša ăăăăadi*, "a tower of heads," i. e., a tower garnished with the heads of the foe. See col. i, 16, 25, 34, 48, and ii, 53.

The word *asîtu* being thus used, first of the towers in the wall of a city, then of similar towers adorned with the heads and bodies of the slain, appears to have gained from this latter the more general sense of "trophy," and to have been applied to any ghastly monument of human remains, whether constructed on the framework of a tower or otherwise. Thus in the inscription of Assurnatsirpal, col. i, 64, we read *ăăăăadišunu unîkiš ana asîte aršip*, "I cut off their heads, I built them up for a trophy," and again in i, 109, *pagrišunu ana asîâte aršip*.

As to the different meanings acquired by the word in the cognate languages, it is not difficult to conjecture how they may have arisen. Thus, from the frequency with which *asaiâte*, or "towers," are seen depicted in lines of fortification as represented on the bas-reliefs, we can understand how the word came to have in the Talmudic the sense of "wall." Again, from the comparative slenderness of some of these *asaiâte* and their column-like appearance may have come the Arabic meaning "pillar." The fact that the word appears written in Hebrew with a װ, but in Assyrian with a simple *s*, is, perhaps, an indication that the Assyrians borrowed the term from the Aramean. See Delitzsch, *Assyrian Grammar*, § 46. The existence of a root *asû*, signifying "to help, support," seems still doubtful. See Muss-Arnolt's *Assyrian Dictionary*, pp. 74, 84. But supposing such a root to have existed, the *asaiâte*, or "towers," in the defences of a city must have been so called as being "helps" or "supports" to the wall.